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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 000719

SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [GR](#)
SUBJECT: UNHCR DISAPPROVES OF GREECE'S HANDLING OF REFUGEE CLAIMS

REF: 07 ATHENS 2204

Classified By: DCM Tom Countryman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A stunning April 15 UNHCR report called upon EU Member States to refrain from returning asylum seekers to Greece under the Dublin Protocol until further notice. According to the report, asylum seekers in Greece face undue hardships in having their claims adjudicated due to problems with procedures to determine refugee status and poor reception conditions. Local UNHCR representative Geroge Tsarbobopoulos told poloffs that while Greece does need assistance from the EU and other EU counties, it was showing little initiative in seekng out such aid. Tsarbobopoulos has thus far seen little response by the GoG to the UNHCR report beyond a blanket governmental denial. End Summary.

UNHCR REPORT

¶2. (U) On April 15, UNHCR issued a report calling uon EU Member States to stop returning asylum eekers to Greece until further notice despite their right to do so under the so-called Dublin Protocol. The Dublin agreement permits states to return an apprehended migrant to the country where the migrant first entered the European Union. Although the report was negative (below), it did note some improvements in the Greek refugee system, such as the publication of an information leaflet for asylum seekers in various languages and the establishment of a country-of-origin information unit. UNHCR also encouraged EU and neighboring governments and the European Commission to increase their support for Greece in addressing the shortcomings of its asylum system. Suggested tools include bilateral partnerships, increased EU funding for asylum-related projects and specific responsibility-sharing agreements.

THE NUMBERS

¶3. (C) In 2007, Greece received 25,113 new asylum claims. This follows a 170 percent increase in illegal immigrations to Greece in 2007. According to Frontex, the European Union agency for external border security, 160,000 illegal immigrants were discovered in the EU in 2007, of which 70,000 were in Greec, which has over 18,400 kilometers of coastline. Of these 25,000 new asylum cases, only eight were granted asylum at first instance (.03 percent) while an additional 138 were granted on appeal (.55 percent). In comparison, according to the UNHCR report, the United Kingdom received 27,905 applications and recognized 30 percent at first instance and 24 percent on appeal. Sweden received 36,370 applications in 2007 and recognized 56 percent at first instance and 14 percent on appeal. Germany received 19,164 new applications and recognized 20 percent at first instance. In addition to the low acceptance rates, asylum seekers in Greece also face long waiting periods which can range from two months to four years. In a May 15 meeting, George Tsarboboulos, the country director for UNHCR, reiterated that Greece has the lowest approval rate of any EU country.

¶4. (U) According to the report, the low percentage rates and the long waiting periods for Greece are the result of poor infrastructure. There is a lack of personnel at both the airport -- to do initial interviews -- and at the Central Asylum Department. Greece has 11 qualified asylum officers, while Germany, which had a lower number of applicants in 2007, has 160 asylum officers and twice as many administrative personnel. Furthermore, according to UNHCR, a review of a sample of the denied applications showed that many lacked answers to basic questions and had only a standard explanation for the denial - repeatedly using identical language in virtually every case.

FAILING BASIC NEEDS

¶5. (U) The UNHCR report said that the Government of Greece is failing to meet claimants, basic reception needs. While Greece has a Presidential Decree mandating the state to provide shelter to asylum seekers and a daily allowance sufficient to meet their needs, this is not currently implemented. Accommodations, especially for families, single

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women and men, remain extremely limited. At the end of 2007, there were only ten reception centers administered by the state with an overall capacity of 770 places. Three of these centers are reserved for the exclusive use of unaccompanied minors.

OTHER EUROS HALT RETURNS

16. (U) Even before the release of the UNHCR report, media sources reported Sweden, Norway, and the Netherlands had already temporarily halted the return of some asylum seekers to Greece because of concerns about applicants, treatment and their chances of getting a fair hearing. Since the release of the report, Finland has also been added to the list of countries refusing to send some claimants back to Greece.

17. (C) In a May 15, 2008 meeting, UNHCR representative George Tsarbopoulos told Poloffs that Greece faces significant resource constraints in dealing with refugees. He agreed that Greece needs support from other EU countries but criticized Greece for showing little initiative in seeking such assistance. He said that with aid from the EU Greece could build additional reception centers and hire staff to work on reducing the backlog of asylum cases while screening out current applicants who are solely economic immigrants. (NOTE: Tsarbopoulos indicated that in his opinion 99 per cent of Bangladeshis and Pakistanis were economic migrants. End Note) He added that Greece had "no coherent policy" and that the system is not designed to encourage people to apply for refugee status given the lack of information and good screening mechanisms at the borders.

18. (C) While the report focuses on the plight of Dublin Regulation returnees, Tsarbopoulos stated that first-instance applicants face similar constraints in getting a fair adjudication of their refugee claims as those of returning migrants. He also noted that refugee treatment during initial reception and detention varied throughout Greece depending on local leadership. He cited the example of the former head of the Hellenic Coast Guard on the island of Mytilini, Captain Mikromasteras, whom he claimed was "crazy" and would see and treat every adult male immigrant as a member of a terrorist organization (reftel). Asked by Poloffs about returning jihadis mixed in with migrants, Tsarbopoulos said that anything was possible but that he had not seen or heard much to support that fear.

COMMENT

19. (C) We doubt that the UNHCR report will lead to major improvements. Greek authorities assess that most migrants seek to transit Greece en route to other locations. The Greeks are loathe to take steps that could, from their perspective, make it less difficult for migrants to remain in Greece. Greece wants help from the EU in finding ways to prevent migra but does not appear to`rom the EU that could rm presence of migrants Qs responded by dismissing the report's claims and by reiterating Greece's geographical vulnerability to migration, most recently by the Minister of the Interior Pavlopoulos. End Comment. SPECKHARD